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ABSTRACT

An elementary school foreign language program and the French curriculum are described. French and Spanish are among the electives offered as part of a New Jersey magnet school for gifted children from preschool through grade 5. Participation in the daily half-hour instruction is entirely optional and has been growing in popularity during the 5 years the magnet school has been in operation. Among the aspects of the program described are: teaching methods, the arrangement of the classroom, class exercises, learning activities, and instructional materials. Role play, skits, stories, puppet shows, rhymes, question and answer sessions, vocabulary review, and quiz shows are among the learning activities conducted at the various age and proficiency levels. This program demonstrates that a successful foreign language program can be implemented without great expense in almost any elementary school with students of all ability levels. Children who have elected to learn a second language at a young age appear to enjoy learning the language for its own sake rather than because it may be useful in later life. (RW)

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FRENCH FOR CHILDREN:

Aspects of an Elementary School Foreign Language Program

Paper presented at Northeast Conference

by

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and

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ABSTRACT

FRENCH FOR CHILDREN: ASPECTS OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM

B. Kodjak and K. Hayser

An elementary school foreign language program in French and Spanish, which encompasses grades P-5 and is housed in two public schools in Montclair, New Jersey, has tripled in size since its inception in 1977. In these papers, originally presented at the 1982 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the teachers who have developed the French curriculum discuss the program in depth. The implementation of the magnet school program with emphasis on the important logistics of foreign language scheduling, and the techniques, strategies and materials employed at each level are included. Practical ideas and specific resources are also included, as well as methods of articulation between primary, intermediate and middle schools. The emphasis throughout is on the institution of a successful program in almost any elementary school with students of all abilities - without great expense.

Teachers of elementary school foreign language tend to feel professionally isolated - for us, there are no organizations, workshops or courses to turn to for ideas. We work in a vacuum, never knowing who else is out there, let alone what kinds of things they are doing. In Montclair, New Jersey, over the past five years, we have been developing a program which has been deemed successful - and we would like to share aspects of that program with you this morning. We will describe briefly how the program came to be, how it evolved, the logistics, curriculum and methods and resources for materials. We have videotapes of the children at work and handouts containing sample lesson plans and songs and games we use with the children. There is also a bibliography of resources and where they can be found. We plan to leave some time for your questions and comments.

The program came about by way of a voluntary integration plan which placed magnet schools in key areas of the town. The assumption was that the educational program of a school would attract children to it rather than its proximity in the neighborhood. The assumption proved valid, our integration figures met all the requirements and we received lots of Title VI monies to fund the plan. The particular magnet school which concerns us today is called the Gifted and Talented magnet. It is actually two schools, Nishuane School where I teach which houses children from 4 years or pre-school through currently half of Grade 2, and Hillside School where Kathy teaches which houses the other half of Grade 2 through Grade 5. From there the children go to a middle school which follows programs begun at Nishuane-Hillside and in 9th Grade everybody goes to the high school. The G/T Magnet offers children a wide spectrum of courses in dance, drama, science, etc., which they may elect to take in addition to their regular basics. French and Spanish are part of this elective program.

The program at Nishuane was initially conceived to be a half-year course, exploratory in nature. We started, 5 years ago, with three classes held in

the afternoon, mostly 1st and 2nd graders, with 33 children. The kindergarteners wanted to come in and parents were protesting against the half-year limitation, so we went to four classes the next year and allowed the children to stay in for a full year. Then the 4 year-olds agitated to come in, so the following year we added two morning classes for them and another level, French 2 for the continuing children. The next year we added French 3, going to eight classes a day, and the program has held at that. I now see 125 children a day, on three levels, for periods of 30 minutes duration, average class size 15 or 16.

A major factor in the success of the program has been, to my way of thinking, its optional character. Children take French or Spanish because they want to or their parents want them to. It's up to us to keep them interested, as they may also drop out anytime they wish.

To sum up, this is not an expensive program with all kinds of hardware and software. These are not special children in the sense that they have to pass tests or be identified in any special way. This is a public school which offers all children who want it daily half-hour periods of either French or Spanish on a continuous, sequential basis.

Now let's take a look at the children. . .the youngest, who are 4 years old going on 5, and the oldest who are 6 going on 7, and a few who are 7 going on 8.

VIDEOTAPE

Someone once wrote, during the FLES days, that foreign language with little children was rather "caught" than "taught". And I think this is the essence of a primary school foreign language program. Little children are not model pupils - they don't like to sit still and wait to be called on,

their attention and retention spans are short, they refuse to learn what is abstract or uninteresting. But they have a remarkable ability for being able to pick up a foreign language. We all know that when children are transplanted to a foreign country, they learn the language much faster than the adults they came with. Granted, 30 minutes a day in a foreign language classroom is not the same as daily contact in France, but the fact remains that the potential is there and children can learn a lot of French if the curriculum and strategies of teaching are geared to their developmental level and life-experiences.

What are their interests between the ages of 4 and 7? They're fascinated by numbers and colors and anything that relates to them - their bodies, how they feel, what hurts them, their families, their pets, their clothes, their school, their toys and food. They like birthdays and parties and holidays. All these topics can be divided into units of noun and verb categories and introduced in a step-by-step systematic way. They like to create imaginary worlds, they like to talk and say chants and role-play. The ways they like to play can be turned into strategies for teaching them.

In terms of the curriculum, I usually begin the year with numbers because the interest level is so high, then fill the room with balloons and teach colors. Parts of the face and body come around Halloween because I can cut numerous pumpkin faces and hang up skeletons, and family members make their natural appearance between Thanksgiving and Christmas or Hanukkah when there is a lot of visiting back and forth. After Christmas comes action verbs which are somewhat more abstract than nouns or objects, but I have Georges the Clothespin Man to help me. Alas, Georges gets 'malade' and has to go home to his 'maison'. We then learn a lot about his 'maison' - 'la porte',

etc., and then we go inside a pretend French 'maison' straight to French people's favorite room, 'la cuisine'. And you saw the 'la cuisine' lesson on the videotape. When everyone in the family says "j'ai faim", a good 'maman' gives them fruit, and the fruit lesson is in the sample lesson plan in the handouts. But my favorite part of that unit is the culminating activity because it's so authentically French and a new experience for American children. The children each bring in fruit, and I do and I give them plastic knives (even the 4 year-olds). They cut up the fruit themselves and make a gigantic fruit salad which I then distribute and they eat. That grand finale usually comes right before Spring vacation. After that, I teach animals to the little ones, clothes and the alphabet to the older ones. Also, in the spring we are usually practicing for a play which we give with the Spanish children in June.

The how of teaching small children is just as important, if not more so, than what to teach them. But before going into that I need to say a little about the format of the class. There are two major areas in my classroom and whether I have a large or small classroom this kind of demarcation still obtains. The area close to the blackboard contains a long table and chairs and the children come in and sit clustered around the table. I greet them, and call the roll by pretending I don't know where they are. The children pop up and say 'ici!'. Then I ask them how they are, 'comment ca va' or 'comment vas-tu?' and they have a whole variety of answers. They like to tell what hurts them (mal à la dent, mal à l'estomac', etc.) whether they're happy or sad, tired ('fatigué') or mad ('fiché'). It's interesting to note here that the little boys never forget to say 'heureux' and the little girls never forget to say 'heureuse'. This kind of exercise is the warmup. About the last 12

minutes we go to the back part of the room and sit in a circle on the rug while I get out the toys or pictures or flannel shapes and present or review the lesson. This area of the room is bounded by a huge cardboard Eiffel Tower on one side and two large cardboard French windows on the other, so we call this area 'Paris'. The association is that 'Paris' is where all the most pleasurable things happen. When the lesson is over, I call them by the colors they are wearing or their ages or their clothes to go to the door. Then I stand at the door and shake hands with each one as they leave. They either say 'au revoir' or the word of the day - and the word of the day is anything that has to be reinforced - either the theme of the lesson, the name of the month or day, or any word or phrase that needs more practice.

Young children like to hear new words and to imitate them, but they make no conscious effort to retain them unless they are couched in some palatable form. They have to be able to hold them or taste them or manipulate them before they can internalize them. So I create various situations with toys where, in order to participate, the children have to use the new words. For instance when I teach the family, I put 'grand'mère' and 'grand-père' in a shoebox house on one side of the rug and the rest of the family on the other side of the rug with a big wooden train beside them. Children like to put things in things so the scenario is that all the family has to get into the train in order to get to 'grand'mère's' house. The children can only load the family members in if they remember their names. If someone is forgotten, he/she doesn't get to go and is very sad. For 2nd and 3rd level children I keep adding relatives and they have to make a sentence, ex. "Papa est dans le train". The child who says 'le train' gets to move 'le train' to 'grand'mère's' house and he says 'tchou, tchou, tchou' all the way. Then they all get off the train

and into 'grand'mère's' house. The forgotten person becomes the word of the day at the door, and that person is invariably the first one on the next day.

Farm animals are out in the field eating and talking when a big wolf comes along who says, "J'ai faim." ". The children can rescue the animals and put them safely in the barn when they say their names and sounds, ex. "le coq dit 'cocorico' " etc. If any animal is left out in the field, the wolf eats it. Sometimes the children role-play the scenes themselves as you saw in the 'la cuisine' lesson. As they grow more proficient, they like to wear funny hats or masks and dramatize little skits as you saw in the Guignol play. The Gessler books are wonderful sources for these little skits and they can be adapted to any level.

Another way of catching children is through the medium of puppets. I have a cast of characters. Coucou (the one in the v/t) has a 'la tête' made only of 'bois'. He never can remember their names and always has to ask them. Babar is very proud because he just celebrated his 50th birthday in Paris last summer so he always asks them how old they are. Georges is a clothespin man who will respond to commands like 'marche', 'cours', 'saute' and 'danse' only if the children remember to say 's'il te plaît, Georges'. Jacques and Fifi are only finger puppets, but their role is crucial. They appear at the beginning and are responsible for wooing the children into the language. All they say to each other is 'bonjour, Jacques', 'bonjour, Fifi' - but then Fifi kisses Jacques on both cheeks and Jacques turns to the children and says 'ooh la la!' We repeat that dialogue several times and then the children usually ask to say 'bonjour' to Jacques and Fifi. From then on, I consider that they are officially into French.

Besides stories and dialogues with puppets, children are motivated by songs and especially game-songs. A very good one that goes with clothes is 'Promenons-nous Dans Le Bois', a song that contains a dialogue between children and a wolf. The children are singing along in the woods, then they stop and ask the wolf if he is there. 'Loup, y es-tu?' The wolf replies, "NON--je mets la chemise", for example. The song repeats, the wolf keeps saying "NON--je mets le pantalon, je mets le chapeau", whatever he chooses to say. The song goes on until finally the wolf replies OUI! and he runs out after the children.

I don't really teach for mastery. All of the basic vocabulary is reinforced again and again by conversations in the warmup and by new play situations in Paris. For the children's sake, so that they have some measure of how much they are learning, I give them a dictée at the end of each unit. The dictée is usually a picture to color or draw and I dictate it solely in French, ex., ' 'la maison est rouge, la fenê[^]tre est jaune". Sometimes a dictée can be making a paperbag puppet or cutting out things, ex., ' 'découpez la pomme", but whatever it is, it is directions that they must follow in French and it's something they can take home.

Young children love to recite rhymes. But finding appropriate rhymes and comptines that are also an authentic part of a French child's repertoire and which contain vocabulary useful to an American child learning French has been a source of ongoing research and would make the subject of another paper. The marionnette song that you heard on the tape is very common ("Ainsi Font"), but the version that I used, the words and tune, is from Anne Slack's TV series of the FLES days, PARLONS FRANCAIS. It's out of circulation now, unfortunately, but I included it in the handouts. Also in the handouts are two songs I learned

in France and which are unavailable anywhere. The best collections of game-songs and comptines that I know of in this hemisphere are CHILDREN'S GAME-SONGS OF FRENCH CANADA (Folkways) and UNE SOURIS VERTE which can be ordered from Didier in Canada. I call your attention to a game-song called 'Trois Fois Passera', similar to our London Bridges which the children look forward to playing every Friday. It ends with a tug of war. The Dick Bruna materials are excellent for teaching numbers and for illustrations of objects in general. They can be ordered through International Playthings, Montclair, New Jersey, and can also be purchased in gift shops or toy shops throughout the country. The Dick Bruna posters and cutouts that I use are only available in Paris so I listed in the handouts the key stores in Paris, also.

That concludes the primary school portion of this session. My children at Nishuane are very lucky because they have an excellent program to go to when they get to Hillside, and Kathy Hayser is going to tell you about that.

Thank you.

Foreign language study - in French, Spanish and Latin - remain an important part of the program in Grades 3 through 5 at the Hillside Gifted and Talented School in Montclair. Our entire magnet program was implemented, as was that at Nishuane, to promote voluntary integration and has been in existence for 5 years. During this past year, about 75 second-graders were also admitted on an experimental basis. The majority of our school's population consists of, but is not limited to, students from Nishuane who have chosen to continue in the next phase of the magnet program.

Almost all of the students who had studied French at Nishuane elect to continue at Hillside. They are placed in classes at an appropriate level based on both the number of years they have had and on their ability. In addition, students may begin language study in any grade. Any student may take and continue with French for as long as he or she desires.

The Hillside school year is divided into 3 cycles and students register for 3 or 4 electives or "aesthetics" during each. French is only one of over 65 courses from which they may choose each cycle in the areas of language, art, music, dance and physical education as well as courses related to science, math, history and language arts. These are, of course, in addition to their required basic courses. No student may elect to skip math for a year! French and Spanish, however, are the only programs which offer continuous, sequential courses throughout the 3 - and now with the addition of Grade 2 - the 4 years that students will be at Hillside.

In spite of the competition, the French program has tripled in size since its inception, and an additional teacher has been hired. Approximately 85% of the students complete what has been the entire 3 year sequence, and 95% of those continue with French at the middle school. Most classes meet 4 days a week for

40 or 45 minutes - an extremely important factor contributing to the students' success and, therefore, to that of the program. At the upper levels, due to the numbers of students and a necessarily limited number of periods in the school day, some classes meet twice a week. However, those students who demonstrate outstanding ability and/or interest in language study may enroll - with the teacher's permission - in an intensified program called Creative I French. This course provides for more in-depth study of both the language and the culture, more intensive instruction in reading and writing and an introduction to formal grammar - all of which prepares them for the transition to more advanced courses at the Middle School. Although our original program advocated an ideal class size of 10-15 students, classes now average 15-20 with one - the Creative I, as high as 26. The unusual interest and ability of each of these students, however, compensates somewhat for the large number.

Almost all of the students in the next segment of film you are about to see had studied French for 1, 2, or 3 years at Nishuane before coming to Hillside. You will see the Continuons class - designed for second and third graders continuing French in their first year at Hillside; the emphasis is on listening and speaking - conversation and free response rather than pattern drills. You will also see a fourth-grade class performing skits which they have written themselves and a fifth-grade class in one of their first attempts at reading unfamiliar material. FILM

It seems that children who have begun the study of a language at a very early age have been instilled with a unique attitude that one is unlikely to find at any other age. It encompasses a love of the particular learning activity for the sake of itself - not because it will be useful in travel or because it may enhance their ability to find a job - not because it will fulfill a requirement to

be eligible to enter a particular school. Their eagerness to learn stems from pure enjoyment - from a sense of fun and fantasy. It is this special attitude - their own source of motivation - which must be sustained as they advance through increasingly complex courses while still very young. Language must continue to be an adventure rather than a chore. It is this philosophy that has served as the core and guide in the development of our program.

A typical class at any level begins with a warm-up question and answer segment which encourages free response. Unlike the FLES programs of the '60's which were based on an ALM method, students respond to real situations. They are not always "Très bien, merci. Et toi?" They are tired, angry, sick, happy, and can often explain why in French. I do not hear "Il fait beau" on a rainy day, although they may make-up answers for fun if they wish. Their ages may change from 8 to 120 from one day to the next!

These questions often serve to review vocabulary. After a unit on parts of the body has been completed, for example, questions on subsequent days may be "De quelle couleur sont vos cheveux?" or "Combien de mains avez-vous?" Making up sentences - given guidelines - such as using a preposition in a sentence and demonstrating its meaning as you saw second graders do in the film - is also an activity usually included in the warm-up. This encourages conversational skills and activity - still an important factor at this level.

The major portion of the lesson includes a review of the previous day's lesson and the introduction of new material. Topics covered at earlier levels - such as La Famille or La Maison - may be reintroduced and expanded upon. Our curriculum is based on the "Bon Voyage" program - a series of 90 pamphlets, each presenting new topics while incorporating vocabulary already learned. Accompanied by filmstrips and records, various units include pictures, games, puzzles, songs,

poems and short skits in addition to the lessons which become increasingly but very gradually complex.

This particular series is, unfortunately, out of print as of a year ago, but Gessler has replaced it with the Eclair program - which they consider to be of equal value. Having some such similar program is important - to be used - not as a textbook - but as supplementary material, providing a sequence. Lessons are adapted and presented by the teacher - using a great deal of realia and visual aids including flashcards, slides and projectuals. Some are commercial; most are teacher and often student made. A pile of old magazines to cut from and a chalkboard are really the minimum essentials. Artistic talent might help, but students actually enjoy stick - figures - especially of animals - more than a skilled drawing. They soon become familiar with the configurations - rabbits, cats and dogs, for example, need only a change of ears and tail. One of their favorite games to review vocabulary is Dessinez - they have 5 seconds to draw a given French word on the board.

The written word is presented after the students are thoroughly familiar with the vocabulary - and the transition to reading is natural. This has been successful at even the second-grade level. As early as third grade, various letter combinations may be pointed out in relation to pronunciation and writing is introduced although it is not emphasized until grade 4.

It is entirely possible to introduce principles of grammar as early as grade 2. They have correctly used heureux and heureuse since age 4 and simple rules for the agreement of adjectives beginning with the favorite topic of colors can be explained. As they use their imaginations to speak of purple cows and pink carrots or as they, in grade 3, put together index cards each containing one word to form sentences with proper agreement of gender and number, as they would a puzzle, they never realize they are doing that "dreaded grammar" lesson.

Although they use verbs in sentences throughout the program, they are not introduced to conjugation until the Creative I class. Pattern drills are not used - they create their own sentences given a subject and an infinitive - and games such as Musical Verbs, described in the hand-out, actually makes conjugation fun.

All children love play-acting and skits and short plays are used extensively and for various purposes. You saw two examples in the film. A fourth-grade class wrote and performed the skits on les magasins as a culminating project for a unit on shopping and money. They were prepared in advance and props were brought from home. Often other French and even Spanish classes are invited to these kinds of presentations. A fifth-grade class practiced their reading in the restaurant skit, a Bon Voyage unit. Creative I students are given about one class period to develop a skit on a particular topic or from a story they have read - changing the narrative from third to first person. Props, in this case, are anything they can adapt from what they find in the classroom, or in my office, etc. Nothing is safe when 26 students scamper around to get the "best stuff" first - and their imagination and ingenuity is far more valuable than a room full of expensive props. Puppet shows are also a favorite at all ages and excellent for the shy student. French characters are available from Gessler and others can be easily made. A large cut-out box on a draped table serves as a theater.

Skits are usually performed by small groups, but we often work as an entire class to transform the room into another setting as we work on a unit. La Gare is simple with rows of chairs for our train, the puppet theater as the guichet. Pupils assume many roles working in the station or as passengers seeking information, buying tickets, etc. Those same chairs become a boat when enclosed with a roll of paper which they must step over to get in and out - wading in the water -

paper fish on the floor. They sail to an island to dig for treasure encountering many kinds of weather, alligators and tall mountains - climbing from floor to chairs to tables to reach the top. In another, the jungle--we have pails of water to represent streams, sticks for the fire, pots of flowers and toy animals. Vocabulary is always learned before we begin and enhanced with various expressions such as "en voiture", "Ca y est", and "au secours" as we proceed as a class. After several trips, conversation becomes spontaneous as they describe what they are doing, where they are going, colors, weather, etc. Again, skits are then often prepared by small groups.

Classes usually end with a game. Standards such as Jacques a Dit or Simon Says, Bingo, Lotto, Baseball and Twenty Questions are used in addition to many which are teacher invented. Several are described in the hand-out. Almost any idea can be turned into a game and most require a single preparation of material to be used again and again, or none at all. They can be as simple as holding seven colors behind your back as children guess which you're going to pull out-- to a complex board game such as the popular "Clue" with the board and all cards hand-made. Students must guess who committed the crime, in what room, and not what weapon they used (to limit violence) - but what they were wearing!

T.V. quiz shows provide many ideas. Bonnie Farbstein, a teacher at the middle school and I developed many for use at that level, and I have found nearly all can be adapted to an elementary level. Match Game, Concentration, Hillside Squares, and even Family Feud are but a few examples.

Jump Rope, Category races, Football for vocabulary review - the list goes on and on. Games are extremely valuable for interesting review, evaluation, motivation and fun - prizes are given occasionally. It is most important, however, to establish an attitude of sportsmanship, or really sportspersonship,

in the beginning of the first year, so that no child is ever subjected to undue pressure or embarrassment.

The year concludes with our annual presentation of Cabaret, a foreign language showcase in French and Spanish presented in the evening. Songs, dances and skits are performed for an audience of relatives and friends who are seated at candlelit tables in the gym, where a stage is built - and who are served refreshments by beret or sombrero clad waiters and waitresses. This 90 minute show is a major interdisciplinary project involving the drama, music, dance, home economics and art teachers and approximately 175 children. The setting, costumes, make-up, programs and especially the 15 or so "acts" themselves require a great deal of energy, work and commitment, but the public relations factor in encouraging the support of foreign language in the elementary school is unequalled.

We hope that we have demonstrated - to some small extent - today that a successful foreign language program can be instituted in almost any elementary school with students of all abilities and perhaps - most importantly - in these times - without great expense. We would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.